COMIX WORLD MEMORIES

There was a *COMIX WORLD 230*. Jay Kennedy sent me a xerox of it. Just goes to show, you can't trust memory. The reason all those back issues are so fucked up has to do with the evolution of the newsletter and my changing attitudes toward it. For awhile I did it monthly, then weekly when a lot of things were happening, then monthly again and I was always in a hurry because it was a chore to do when I was busy writing stories and articles to make my living. My attitude toward the whole thing zigzagged because of the kinds of experiences I had with artists and publishers. When I had a bummer with someone, I was not inclined to spend a lot of time giving them free promo in my letter. If I had a good time, I felt like devoting a whole issue to the pictures and incidents as I did with things like the Hooker's Ball and Street Fairs. My back issues reflect my different moods and I don't apologize for any of it; with me you know, with most public writers you don't. Over the years I have shared what it is like behind the scenes. Unless I was quoting someone or doing a rare interview, I was the voice you heard and all the opinions and contradictions were mine. I did not remain the same person during those years anymore than you did. I know a lot of you pretty well from years of correspondence and occasional meetings and I know you have been through your marriages and divorces, your children and their problems, your successes and failures in the art business; well, I have been through these, too, and this is what we share though most of it remains unspoken. The early voice of Comix World was that of a young idealist, an ex-teacher-cum-pop photographer/writer, a sometime cartoonist and convention promoter, someone with fingers in many different pies. The current voice is that of an older man who still collects comix, though selectively, one who does a lot more research and writing than participating, one who has seen many artist friends fail to make a living at their craft and far too many die much too young. That younger writer was often lonely, disappointed, broke, angry, and unsure of the future. He was frequently used and abused and when the phone rang it was someone wanting something, not offering help. The older writer has a thicker skin and, expecting nothing, is often surprised when something nice comes along.

I have argued often that my set of newsletters taken together are the only complete history of comics extant and I still make this claim. Most of the histories in print exclude any aspect of comic history the authors chose to ignore. In *Comix World*, you will find the history of Mr. Natural as well as the complete background on Superman, Popeye, Smokey Stover, and hundreds of other characters that have dominated the world of comics over the years. Only in *Comix World* will you find the links between the rich history of children's literature and the comic strip and book traditions that grew out of sources like the Fables of Aesop and the stories of Uncle Remus. My personal philosophy has always been inclusive, and I have never given into the groupthink pressures of cliques. In many of my early issues I wrote about

CLAY GEERDES'
COMIX
WHOA, DUDE--!!
LIKE, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN FOR THE LAST TWENTY YEARS?!
HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, CLAY! GREETINGS FROM SEATTLE, THE WORLD GRUNGE CAPITAL!
HERE'S HOPING YOU "SHAKE YOUR BOOTY" FOR TWENTY MORE YEARS! ~
JWILLIAMS '93
WAVE

CLAY GEERDES **COMIX WAVE** 135
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overground as well as underground comix and I got letters from the underground clique calling me a traitor and saying that Marvel Comics were this and DC comics were that and I should only write about *ZAP* or *SLOW DEATH* or *DIRTBALL*. I paid no attention. I went to the San Diego Comic Convention and I talked about comics with everyone who was interested in the form. I had been going for several years before any underground people came. The publishers finally stopped being hippy operations and decided if they were going to survive they would have to have representation at the cons. Underground attendance at the cons increased after the Head shops were outlawed in the early seventies, but interest in undergrounds never grew very big. There are a number of reasons, but I think the major one was the assimilation of the sex and violence of the undergrounds into mainstream comics. After all, when the undergrounds defied the Code of 1954 and continued to appear and sell, Marvel and DC were watching and if you compare the overground comics of late seventies with the neo-ECs, it is pretty clear that Marvel, while rejecting most underground artists, very quickly picked up on the underground themes which were selling copies of *HEAVY METAL*.

While underground comix played to the hippy movement and New left radicalism a la SDS, the artists who drew them did not exist in a vacuum. They read and were influenced by mainstream comics. Marvel was doing Robert E. Howard's *Conan* at the time and lots of underground artists were fascinated by the character and wanted to get in on it. Jack Jackson [Jaxon], who was art director for Chet Helms' Family Dog and who did a lot of art for *SLOW DEATH* and *SKULL*, submitted a Conan painting to Marvel. It was rejected. Spain Rodriguez did an underground Conan poster. He always thought Barry Smith's Conan was too neat, too clean, and he wanted to show a barbarian who really lived on the cutting edge of nature. Rand Holmes, who taught himself to draw by copying entire stories of Wally Wood when he was a teenager, was fascinated by the barbarian comics and would have drawn a story for Bob Sidebottom's *BARBARIAN* had he not been forced to return to Canada. Perhaps the best example of a link between underground and overground comics was the work of Kansas City artist/animator Richard Corben. It was Jaxon who got him to contribute to *SKULL* and *SLOW DEATH* after seeing his Barbarian stories in *FANTAGOR*, Corben's own fanzine. Corben did a number of underground comix, including *GRIM WIT*, then his work was assimilated into the overground. It would be hard to find any underground artist who wasn't intellectually and artistically indebted to *MAD* magazine.

But in the early days of CW, I got letters telling me to ignore Marvel and the other overground companies and to concentrate on underground comix only. When I started writing about Newave and minicomics, I got the same kind of letters. I should ignore the new wave of underground-influenced cartoonists and only write about the old masters like Wilson and Spain and Crumb. If I had paid attention to all the advice I received, CW would have lasted a few months and gone the way of hundreds of other small press zines. But I was never the fan kowtowing to this or that. To me, comic art has a continuity going from primitive cave drawings through Egyptian hieroglyphics to the multitude of forms currently on the shelves of comic book stores around the world. I think the state of comic art has advanced incredibly since the appearance of the earliest underground comic books in the sixties. Mike Ploog's illustrated comic book version of L. Frank Baum's *THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF SANTA CLAUS* [Tundra, 1992] is a masterpiece, and the *TOM SAWYER* he did for the new Classics series ranks with it. I am always amazed at the expertise of the Spanish artists whose work I see in *El Vibora* and *Kiss*. That there are many nice editions of comic art books in the 1990s is a reflection of the confidence publishers now have in the viability of a medium which was considered trash in the 1930's when the first comic strip reprints were run by Max Gaines. --Clay 2/20/93

The latest **WE ARE THE WEIRD** letter from Joe Bob Briggs has a scintillating review of Madonna's cast iron **SEX** book, the one I'm sure no comic book fan bought because it won't fit in a plastic bag and stand neatly in a comic book box. $3 from POB 2002, Dallas, TX 75221.

HARVEY KURTZMAN
[1924-1993]

There is always a person who finds a new path and has nerve enough to explore it, to lead the way; Harvey Kurtzman was one. He looked around him in the early 1950s and cast a cynical eye on the rampant comformism that was turning Americans into what William Lederer called "a nation of sheep." Kurtzman knew that beneath all those neatly pressed suits were men trapped and discontented, organizational men who had lost touch with the child within, a lonely generation inwardly mad. It was this feeling coupled with a love for great comic strip artists like McCay, McManus, Segar, Capp, and Kelly that gave birth to the idea which became *MAD* in 1952. Kurtzman, a New Yorker from birth, a graduate of Cooper Union, knew there were a lot of people walking the streets of Manhattan who longed to escape from the daily grind and he gave it to them in what is probably the most influential comic book in the history of the medium. Looking through the first 24 issues of *MAD* is like taking a trip through the cartoon and comic character hall of fame and for that one couldn't find a more inventive and congenial leader than Harvey Kurtzman.

A man who is not listed in the World almanac as a significant cartoonist.

A man whose death on February 21, 1993, was not front page news, whose life was not reviewed in detail on Entertainment Tonight.

If there is anyone more influential in the history of underground and newave comix, I would like to know who it is. When I was organizing Underground '76, there was one person who was top priority as guest of honor, one man named by the artists I asked as the person they would like to see at the convention. That was Harvey Kurtzman. Roger Brand and Joel Beck spoke of him with reverence. He had published some of the earliest work of Robert Crumb and Gilbert Shelton in his *HELP!* magazine in the early sixties. He had gone from *MAD* to *HUMBUG!* to *TRUMP!* and finally to create the most expensive and elaborate parody strip in the history of the medium, *Little Annie Fanny*. He had lectured and taught in the School of Visual Arts and when I contacted him about coming to Berkeley for our small convention he said fine, make me a reservation.

Though it was a lot of hard behind-the-scenes work at the time, I have a lot of good memories of that convention. Kurtzman was helpful and supportive and made himself available for anything we wanted to do. A group of us gave him a tour of Telegraph Avenue and told him stories about the Free Speech Movement and some of the more exciting moments in Berkeley's radical history. We had a lunch party at the Heidelburg. I told Kurtzman he ought to go to the San Diego Convention, that it was becoming the major American convention since the decline of Phil Seuling's annual New York Con. I told Shel Dorf and the San Diego Convention Committee that Kurtzman was friendly to coming down and the visit came together by the Summer of 1977. I looked at a lot of the pictures from those two conventions last night. There is Kurtzman talking to Aline Crumb on Telegraph. Joking with Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevli at lunch. Listening to Jack Katz talk about the latest issue of his *First Kingdom*. Waiting for a stoned Gilbert Shelton to answer a question on a panel. Signing some *MAD* books for a few kids in their forties. Posing with Sergio Aragones and me. I was wearing the t-shirt Joel Milke screened with Kurtzman's Annie Fanny logo on it. The logo ran on *COMIX WORLD 25*. There is Kurtzman shaking hands with Glenn Bray who had just completed an Index of Kurtzman's work.

So long ago now. Doesn't seem like more than yesterday. What remains for me is the memory of a man who loved comic art and believed in it as a means of expression and social commentary, one who encouraged others, and certainly one without whom underground and newave comix would have been very different than they are today. Without his support and that of others to whom he mentioned and recommended my newsletter, I might have quit long ago. I suspect there are others who might say the same.

My favorite memory of Kurtzman was the afternoon when he was sitting at a table with his daughter, Nellie [Cornelia], and they were both drawing. He was watching her with a loving smile on his face and I knew he was happy at that moment, that she was linked to him through the art and would carry on what he began. Nellie is grown now and I don't know where she is or what she is doing, but if she is listening she should know that there are a great many people our here in the comics community who loved and cherished her father and feel that their lives were greatly enhanced from having known him.

-Clay Geerdes 2/28/93

Your ideas are the strength of your work. There are lots of people who can scribble a picture, but it is your insight into people that will set you apart.

Harvey Kurtzman